

Derek Wallbank, *MinnPost*

WASHINGTON - Arguably the most powerful Midwestern Democrat in Congress, Wisconsin's Dave Obey will retire at the end of this term, leaving the House without its Appropriations chairman and Jim Oberstar without one of his closest legislative allies.

"There is a time to stay and a time to go. And this is my time to go," Obey said in an afternoon press conference.

Since 1969, Obey has represented Wisconsin's 7th District, a sprawling rural area that touches Minnesota's eastern border from Duluth in the north all the way south to Scandia. He now chairs the powerful House Appropriations Committee and in that role influences almost every dollar of federal spending.

"Nothing escaped his attention, he was just so responsive and he will continue to be through the rest of this session," Oberstar said. "But we've lost a great asset for America, a thinker, a doer, a mover, a shaker both in Wisconsin and in Northeast Minnesota and the country at large.

"Personally, he's just a good, dear trusted reliable friend."

Obey, who has typically cruised to re-election, was facing a tough re-election fight this November, though the Big Three election analysts (CQ Politics, Rasmussen and Cook) all had him favored by some margin. Though the Democratic bench in northwestern Wisconsin is fairly deep, May is very late to begin a campaign and Obey's retirement certainly improves the Republicans' odds of capturing the seat.

Obey and Oberstar are the 3rd and 9th most senior members in Congress respectively, and to name the issues where one has lent his clout to the other is to inadvertently miss a whole host of others. Their alliance ranged from major legislation, like when Obey backed Oberstar as he dug in his heels to demand a long-term surface transportation bill, to more local issues like securing dollars to maintain, dredge and otherwise improve the Port of Duluth-Superior.

"Being a bordering state, working closely with Chairman Oberstar and the rest of our delegation, he's been very helpful in understanding the financial issues with the Midwest," Sen. Amy Klobuchar said.

"We have rural issues, he's been very good on some of our forestry issues as well as understanding the unique needs of the Mississippi River and Lake Superior so we've just had a lot in common - and he's been really helpful in securing funding for things that are really important in the Midwest - so we will miss him."

Betty McCollum, the only Minnesotan on the Appropriations Committee (and a relatively junior member of that panel), is now slated to move up three rungs on the seniority ladder next session. She could, of course, jump even higher if any other Democrats above her retire, die or lose in the November elections.

"I feel privileged to call David a friend, and I am grateful for his mentorship," McCollum said in a statement.